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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of generating more support for the public schools among nonparent taxpayers and offers numerous suggestions for communicating with nonparents and involving them in the schools. The author points out that only 26 percent of all homes have school-age children and argues that, although many schools do a good job of maintaining positive contacts with parents, nonparent taxpayers have very little personal contact with the schools. He then outlines several steps school officials can take to provide positive experiences for all citizens: identifying and making use of key communicators (such as doctors, barbers, realtors, and school employees) who have regular contact with large numbers of nonparents; dividing the school district into small areas served by block workers, who can serve as communication links between the schools and all residents; involving nonparents in parent advisory groups and other school-related organizations; and distributing various school publications to all area residents several times a year. (JG)

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REACHING ALL CITIZENS, NOT JUST PARENTS

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SPEAKER G. Marx CLINIC NO. B-21 PROGRAM Gary Marx

Reaching ALL citizens

Try this on for size. If you were to put a note in the back pocket of every elementary and secondary student in the United States, and every one of those notes made it home, you would get into only 26 percent of the homes in the nation. Twenty-six percent. Unfortunately, that note in the back pocket is one of the channels for communication used most often by our schools. Too often, the note doesn't get even get home. In fact, a friend of mine who is a junior high principal, tells me that at the junior and senior high levels, only one in twenty of those notes actually gets home.

Meanwhile, a bond issue fails. Throngs of people with silver hair show up at your budget hearing. Folks who no longer have kids in school organize to protest textbooks. Groups with names that include the words "taxpayer," "concerned," or "citizens against," begin to form in your community. The word up and down the street is that "the schools are coming apart. There's no discipline." At least, "things aren't the way they used to be." "Kids can't read, write, spell or do math." And, the word is that "forty years ago, every student could write like F. Scott Fitzgerald and speak like William Jennings Bryan."

So, what does it all mean? It means one thing for sure. The note in the back pocket is missing at least 74 percent of the homes in this nation. Of course, there are some suburban areas where there are school kids in nearly 100 percent of the homes. And, there are the Sun City's where there are hardly any kids at all. Then, there are all those school district's in between.

How many of you can tell me the percentage of homes in your community in which there are school age kids? We need to know! We must know! And, getting to know the demographics of our communities can often be quite a surprise!

Whatever people are saying about our schools, there is plenty of evidence available in your schools system, and through the National Center for Educational Statistics to indicate that our schools are doing a better job, educating a greater percentage of the American population, than ever before in the history of our nation. There is, unfortunately, plenty of evidence to indicate that public confidence in education is showing a steady decline.

In this age of skepticism, declining public confidence has become a disease of our institutions. If not a disease, at least a symptom. What influences attitudes? Research indicates that personal experiences people have with an institution will do more to influence how people feel about that institution than anything else. Secondly, the personal experiences of friends and neighbors, people we know and trust. And third, things we read in the papers, in school newsletters, and so on. I wouldn't want to imply that all schools aren't doing a good job in providing positive personal experiences for parents, but it's a cinch that, in most communities, non-parent taxpayers have very few personal experiences with our schools. They must, instead, rely upon their own experiences in school. They must rely upon what they see as they observe kids in the community, displaying behavior that's different, not necessarily bad, but different than they remember behavior a few years back. They must rely on what they hear over the back fence or through the news media. We should not forget the importance of providing positive personal experiences for all our citizens.

Today, we're discussing the topic, "Reaching ALL Citizens, Not Just Parents." First, we should provide non-parent taxpayers with positive personal experiences with our schools. In short, we should get them involved. Second, we should do everything we can to assure that when they're talking with their friends over the back fence, or getting the scoop from the beauty operator, that they are hearing the true story. And third, we must provide channels for communication

that will insure a well informed community.

So, where do we start? It seems to me that we should start by putting the planning process for communication to work. The first step in that process is to identify our publics. We should ask, "Who needs to know, or who needs to understand what we're doing, if we hope to be successful?" Then, we need to ask, "What do they need to know...what do they need to understand..if we hope to be successful?" Third, we must ask, "How will they find out or be involved?" "What channels for communication and what involvement activities will be most effective?"

Generally, when we sit down to identify our important publics or audiences, we name that group called, "non-parent taxpayers." But, who are those non-parent taxpayers? Non-parent taxpayers are senior citizens. Non-parent taxpayers are folks whose last child graduated from school during the past ten years. Non-parent taxpayers are people who have no children. Non-parent taxpayers are people whose children are not yet of school age. Non-parent taxpayers are civic and business organizations and service clubs. The Gold Card Club is a great idea, but it doesn't get to all of our non-parent taxpayers.

What do these people need and want to know? They want to know that the school system is well managed. They want to know that kids are learning to read, write, and do math. They want to know how you're spending their tax dollar. They want to know the goals of the school system.

Aristotle said that we tend to judge other people based upon three criteria: Competence...how well we do our jobs. Good Character...what kind of people are we down deep inside? What motivates us? And, Good Will...how do we treat other people? It seems to me that whether we know it or not, we judge our institutions by the same criteria: competence, good character, and good will. As you think about your school system, ask yourself, "How do we reflect our

competence, our good character, and our good will to our TOTAL community?"

Now, the $64,000 question. How should we go about informing or involving our non-parent taxpayers in the schools? Here are some ideas:

Start with key communicators. Identify these people. I'm talking about doctors, dentists, beauty operators, barbers, officers of service clubs, mayors, city council persons, labor leaders, presidents of senior citizens groups, cab drivers, even bartenders. These are people who themselves communicate with dozens of people everyday, parents and non-parents alike. The first thing you should do after you've developed or updated your list of these people, is to put them on the mailing list for your school publications. You may want to invite some of these folks to come to school for lunch or to serve as resource people in your classrooms. An exception might be the bartender!

After some of these folks have dicussed their business, or occupation, or avocation with a career education class or other type of class in your school, present them with an attractive "Teaching Certificate." They'll hang that at home or on the office wall, and it will be like a poster, promoting your school system for many years to come.

Meet on a regular basis with realtors. If possible, hold some of your meetings in the schools. It pays to keep realtors well informed. They are often the first people to explain your school system to newcomers. They are key communicators. They can do a great deal to shape attitudes about your schools. The same is true, by the way, of the Clergy.

Remember that school employees are key communicators for the schools. If a person works in the schools, whatever that person says to friends and neighbors will be taken as the gospel truth. They work there; they oughta know. That's why internal communication is so important.

Be sure school administrators are involved in the community. They should appear, on a regular basis, before service clubs, senior citizens groups, and other organizations. They should be actively involved in community betterment projects. In short, they should be active participants in the community, rubbing shoulders and standing shoulder to shoulder with people from all walks of life. Each school system should have a program or speakers bureau to let people know who can explain what about various school programs.

Organize your community. In cooperation with the PTA or PTO, break your attendance area down into block worker areas. Appoint block workers in each of those areas. Each area should include about 40 homes. That block worker should know that area like the back of her hand. The first project? Conduct a community survey...of all residents. In doing so, find out who has kids and who doesn't. Find out how people feel about the schools, about safety in the neighborhood, about parks and recreation, and other issues. Then, through the PTA and the school, working cooperatively, involve representatives of all groups in that area, whether they have kids in school or not, in solving community problems.

People feel great about being able to serve their community. They'll feel great about your school if that's where the effort gets underway. Meetings of these community task forces will get more citizens involved, more citizens into the school building, and more citizens learning more about the great things happening in the schools. And, through your organizational effort, many of these citizens will feel great personal success. In the process, you'll build a better community, and set a great example for kids.

These block workers will know who those people are in the neighborhood, who don't have kids in school. Through the block workers, copies of the school newsletter can be delivered three or four times a year to their homes.

You'll know where the people are who should be invited to "grandparents days" at school. That's another idea. Invite senior citizens to come to school, and assign a child or two to their new "grandparents for a day." The kids will show these people around schools...and attitudes will blossom.

These block workers will also be able to spot parents of new children...brand spankin' new children. The school might want to send a congratulatory note, or drop it off at the house, or at the hospital. Along with that note, include a few facts about the school, and some tips on nurturing that newborn child, who will one day soon become a student in your school. Invite those new parents to come to a get-together at school. Show them around. Get them acquainted. Introduce them to teachers and other parents. Involve them as much as possible. You can't start too soon. No one is more concerned about education than the parents of a newborn child.

I'm sure you could think of dozens of other ideas that would result from getting your community organized. But the first step is organization. The Gallup Poll indicates that while confidence in schools may be low, in those cases where people said they felt they were informed and involved, there was not only confidence, there was downright support.

Many of our schools have Parent Advisory Groups. I would suggest that you seriously consider opening membership to non-parents as well, especially in dealing with those issues of community wide impact. What are some of those issues? With declining enrollments, one of those issues is the closure of schools. In communities which have matured, where there are fewer children, schools often must be closed. Non-parents have great concerns about what that closure will mean to their community. They have concerns about how the building might be used. They should at least be involved in the implementation phase of school closing plans. Non-parents should also be involved when there are building needs. When you don't have kids in school, the likelihood that you'll support a bond issue

goes down. The concerns of non-parents about paying taxes to educate someone else's children need to be acknowledged. They must be reminded that education is the cornerstone of our democratic society. They must also be reminded that someone else may have helped to pay for the education of their now grown children.

We should remember non-parent taxpayers when we produce and distribute our school publications. How about making your staff newsletter a community newsletter three or four times a year. We can't afford it, you say? Can you afford not to keep all citizens well informed? At bulk rate, you can send a newsletter to every home in your district for 2.1 cents. It seems a small gift to the community. How about producing an activity calendar to keep people informed about school activities and programs? Local banks and other businesses may even sponsor it for you. It's an excellent way of keeping the community informed. Have you considered a newcomers packet? When new people move into your community, whether their kids are in school or not, drop off some information at the house about what's going on at school. Or, if you can't drop it off, mail the information. Any newcomer should know something about the local school.

Here are a few more ideas you may wish to consider:
In some communities, principals take walks through the neighborhood, stopping by various homes and inviting people to visit school on a certain day. School principals might want to walk a block every few weeks and personally invite those folks to school to have lunch at school on a certain day. Then, take those folks on a tour of the school. And, find out what's on their minds.

If you see something good in the paper about people in the community, whether or not they have kids in school, rip it out, jot a note to go with it, and mail it to them or have one of the kids, or a block worker, drop it off. It's nice to be recognized.

Consider a Senior Citizens Art Show or have Senior Citizens judge a kid's art show. How about naming a community "Dynamo of the Week" award to someone who is doing great work in your community, whether or not he or she has kids in school. Publicize it in your newsletter, and share the information with the news media.

What are the primary sources of information about our schools? Generally, it's number one: Students, number two: The School Staff, and number three: School Publications and/or the news media. Let's consider the news media. In many school systems, surveys indicate that the news media are the number one source of information about schools. That shouldn't be the case. The news media, by their nature, only cover what they consider "news." And, there is a great deal more that people need to know about their schools. So, the schools must do a good job in developing and maintaining their own channels for communications. However, we must become increasingly adept at working with the news media. Rule number one: be open, honest, yet tactful at all times. Rule number two: know something about the type of news various media find interesting. Rule three: look for a news peg, that aspect of the story that makes it interesting, and share that news peg with the reporter. Rule four: don't expect reporters to be letter perfect. If a mistake is of great significance, call it to the reporter's attention. If not, remember we make mistakes, too. Rule five: Don't expect everything to make the paper. You're competing with everything else happening in town that day. Rule six: Be creative. Develop press lists. Make your news releases interesting. Come up with an interesting angle. Use public service announcements and guest shots on various programs on radio and television. Ask that language arts exercises or math problems right out of the textbooks be reprinted in the newspaper to give people in the community a personal experience with what's happening in the schools.

Community education offers all kinds of opportunities for getting non-parent taxpayers into your schools, both as teachers and as students. Offer programs that are of greatest interest to the community. Put your building to use for the community. Become a "lighted school." And, how about an adult ed course in, "What your kids are being taught in school and how you can help them."

Provide information for senior citizens on homestead credits. Offer bus rides to various school events, if possible. Get a "Gold Card" club going to allow free admission for senior citizens to certain school events. Open volunteer programs to people whose kids are no longer in school.

Take kids to senior citizens homes to sing. I'll never forget the old fellow who had to be pushing a hundred, who stopped a group of kids near the door of a nursing home. The kids had been there to sing. He asked them if they know "America the Beautiful." They did. And, they sang it, to that beautiful old man. The tears stremed down his face. The communication of a thousand newspaper articles took place in one verse of one song.

There is no end to our list. Because there is no end to the possibilities for communicating with our communities. But, keep this in mind. A <u>sense of community</u> results from common information, common feelings, and common goals. Our schools are the center of the community. And, that sense of community can only result from effective communication. It's up to us to start the ball rolling.

I would suggest to every school district in this nation, develop policies that insure open, honest communication. I suggest that communication and community relations be a part of the overall objectives of <u>the school system</u> and <u>each school</u>. I suggest that communication and community relations be a part of the job description of every employee. I suggest that communications skills be a part of the employee evaluation criteria. Because, my friends, communications skills are survival skills. Communication is the key to understanding. And, understanding

could just be the key to success for all of those beautiful kids in our schools. Thank you very much.

Some Steps In Communicating With Non-Parent Taxpayers

1. Identify non-parent taxpayers. This group includes citizens who wouldn't get the notes you send home with students, even if all those notes actually got home. Non-parent taxpayers include: senior citizens, citizens who have no children, people whose children are not yet in school, people whose children are no longer in school, others.

2. Organize your community. Set up a block worker system. Be sure your messages are shared with all citizens, not just parents.

3. Identify "key communicators" and keep them well informed. Key communicators come into contact with many people each day. Among them are: barbers, beauty operators, doctors, dentists, cab drivers, realtors, the clergy, mayors and others.

4. Mail school system publications to all dwelling units a minimum of three or four times a year.

5. Deliver individual school publications to each dwelling unit a minimum of three or four times a year.

6. Open schools for community or adult education programs.

7. Involve non-parent taxpayers in school and district advisory groups, task forces, and other activities.

8. Involve non-parent taxpayers as resource people in the schools. Present them with a certificate for their efforts.

9. Listen to the total community through surveys and other channels.

10. Establish a program or speakers bureau to tell the school system's story to the total community.

11. Work effectively with the news media.

12. Assure that school administrators and other school personnel are actively involved in building a better community.

13. Hold "Grandparents Days" at school.

14. Start a "Gold Card Club" to make it possible for senior citizens to attend some school events at no charge.

15. Provide newcomers and new parents with information about the schools.

16. Focus your communication on topics that all citizens need to understand better.

17. Develop plans for communicating with non-parent taxpayers and involve the entire school staff in accomplishing the plan.

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